

# Diagnosing Defenses Against the Outsider

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In the previous articles, the authors have been concerned with problems of establishing and maintaining research relationships from the point of view of the research worker. It is the purpose of this paper to switch the discussion to the point of view of the subjects of the research. How do they react to being interviewed, observed, and in general, "researched upon"? What are some of the common defenses they seem to employ? Why do they employ these defenses?

The material presented below is drawn primarily from one researcher's experience. As such it will be limited. We will further limit our examples to defenses that are commonly met during "in-plant" research in industrial organizations. Many possible examples related to unions, hospitals, and governmental agencies are not included. Furthermore, we will not discuss the defenses related to research conducted in the employee's homes. In spite of these limitations, we believe that the examples we present will include many of the basic types of defenses that researchers experience in social organizations.

## Two Sources of Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms may be related to the personality of the subject *vis à vis* the researcher. They may also be related to the social organization as it is expressed through the individual. For example, it is possible for a subject to delay or refuse an interview because he fears all new psychological situations. On the other hand, experience suggests that it is equally possible for the same individual to refuse to be interviewed because he realizes there are important organizational pressures against the research (e.g., the boss doesn't like it).

Admittedly this distinction is not a sharp one in real life. But the researcher must study his subject closely in order to understand the meanings implicit in particular mechanisms. Knowledge of the various origins of the defense mechanisms is not only of research interest but is crucial in handling the underlying resistance and preparing for any changes that might be attempted in the organization later.

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## **Individually Based Mechanisms**

To be interviewed by a research worker is not an easy experience for most subjects. Subjects are known to react to the interview by "being a little nervous" or "uneasy"; or by refusing to speak; or by a complete breakdown into tears; or by talking so much and being so aggressive that the research worker does not have much opportunity to carry out the interview.

Listed below are some of the general factors that operate to make subjects feel anxious about being "researched upon":

1. Interviews are new psychological situations. As such they tend to place a subject in a situation where the purposes are unclear or unknown; the perceptual structure is unstable; the "proper" behavior is unknown. Clearly, such situations tend to produce tension, anxiety, and conflict within individuals.

2. Some subjects know what an interview is like but dislike such a situation because it represents to them an authoritarian relationship where they are submitting to a researcher. This also arouses defenses.

3. Still other subjects are closely attached to and identified with their leader or their work group. They view a research interview as an attempt to make them talk about their very personal relationships with their leader or group, and therefore resist.

4. Research people introduced as being somehow connected with a University often tend to be perceived as "highly educated and rather sophisticated individuals." This connection with the "sacred halls of learning" tends to place some employees (especially top executives with no college education) in a situation which calls for defense of their self.

## **Some Examples of Defense Mechanisms Used by Individuals**

*Manifestations of Fear.* Some subjects simply couldn't control their feelings. They arrived for an interview in an obviously disturbed state. Some were jittery, others nervous, or uneasy. Some "held back their uneasiness" by wringing a handkerchief in their hand, while others arrived with a "death grip" on their clipboard or notebook. Such behavior usually had the effect of making the interviewer more cautious in his questioning, thereby protecting the subject.

Other subjects defended themselves from the researcher by stuttering, by behaving as if they had difficulty in hearing, or by behaving as if they constantly misunderstood the research worker. Still others said, "I'm not sure I understand you," "Would you repeat that please," or "I'm really not clear on your point." All these phrases served to help the subject defend himself from having to answer too many questions. Subsequent interviews with some of these subjects suggested that the blocking at times was rather unconscious.

*Surface Collaboration.* Subjects were known to insist, with politeness and diplomatic certainty, that they "really didn't know much about that problem," or "To be very honest with you, I've never heard of that problem." Others attempted to defend themselves by trying to get the researcher to tell them whether someone already suggested to him that this problem existed in the plant. The subjects then guided their com-

ments according to the researcher's answers. For example, they were cautious in their answers if they were told that this was a problem of interest to the management.

It was also not uncommon to find some subjects (usually supervisors) who defended themselves by simply giving the "correct" or "book" answer to every question. They tended to quote the "principles of supervision" listed in their organization's manual for supervisors. Or they answered questions with such general phrases as "You have to be good to people," "A supervisor must be a man among men," "A good supervisor hits hard, but is fair," etc.

*Problem Denial.* Still other subjects made no bones about their defensive position, and with a rather gruff manner or perhaps with a note of annoyance or surprise, quickly responded to the researcher, "No, definitely not, we never had any of these problems in our place. I'm dead sure of that."

*Silent Treatment.* Some subjects used the "silent treatment" to defend themselves from the researcher. This seemed to be especially successful with the researcher who was new and was out to set a new high in "non-directive" research interviewing. Quite naturally, the degree of silence varied. Some subjects answered all "projective" questions with a direct "yes" or "no". Other subjects took their cue and remained silent by noticing when the interviewer began to write in his notebook.

*By-Path Seduction.* Subjects have been known to "latch on" to the introductory comments the researcher has made and use them as a basis for a series of questions. For example, the subjects expressed an unlimited interest in the university that the researcher was from. Or some subjects asked many questions concerning the nature of the research and the use to be made of the material. Still other subjects wanted to obtain all sorts of details on who was to be interviewed, when and why. In a few instances, subjects defended themselves from the researcher by coercing him to discuss, in general terms, what other people had already said in their interviews.

Subjects came to the interview armed with interesting material concerning their specialty. Thus, in a study of the effect of cost budgets upon people, many of the accountants interviewed attempted to spend hours discussing the many multi-colored, complicated accounting instruments they use. "And of course", they would say, "You *do* want to know about our new cost budget . . ." Before the researcher could even wonder how he might offer a proper negative reply, the lecture began.

*Stalling.* Other top level accountants responded to an inquiry concerning the human factors of budgets in a questioning tone. "Mm . . . hmm . . . yes, of course, human factors in budgets . . . yes, that is important, isn't it." Some would simply deny the existence of the problem. For example, one controller said, "No, I don't think it is a problem in

my company. It might be in others but I don't see it here," or "Well, I don't know if I could be of much help. My problems are technical ones."

The interesting aspect of these semi-denials and this hedging was that the same accountants terminated the interview with a sentence like, "And as I said before, the human factors in budgets are the most important factors. If only people would realize that . . . etc." This would be uttered in such a convincing manner that one would hardly suspect the same person, an hour before, doubted the existence of the problem. The accountants could have been "stalling for time" to think about the problem while wanting to conceal this from the researcher. In other words, some of them could have incorporated in their role as executives such values as "I will always be certain," "I will never procrastinate," "I will have the answers on the tip of my tongue," so that they could not comfortably lean back in their chairs and think for a few minutes concerning the problem.

*Other Procedures.* These include the use of such devices as the following: (1) *Protective forgetting.* Some subjects defend themselves by "accidentally" forgetting about their interview appointment. (2) *The rush act.* Other subjects did not forget their appointment, but "just had to schedule an important meeting which will, I'm afraid, cut the research interview in half." (3) *Handy hurdles.* Still other subjects have asked to be interviewed after their working hours and away from the plant. When the researcher remarked that he lived thirty miles away and might therefore have to delay the interview, it was interesting to note the smile and "Oh that's perfectly all right. I understand. I don't mind waiting." (4) *Rumors.* One subject started a rumor which suggested that she spent a terrible night after the research interview and just couldn't see how she could go through it again. The rumor eventually reached the researcher as intended. Fearing he might jeopardize his position in the plant, the researcher cancelled the second and subsequent interviews with that employee. (5) *Advance preparation.* Finally, numerous subjects have attempted to defend themselves by trying to find out who had already been interviewed and then asking these people as many questions as possible concerning the nature of the interview, the researcher, etc.

### **Organizationally Based Mechanisms**

We now turn to the defense mechanisms that may be largely attributable to the organization. These defense mechanisms serve to protect the organization against the outsider until the role, objective, and methods of the researcher are clarified and accepted. The researcher may find that organizational mechanisms may be due to reasons similar to those listed below.

1. The agents of the organization may decide to resist the research program because they perceive it as a possible attempt to destroy something already existing in the organization. For example, some research projects are resisted because

they are perceived as being designed to weaken a union. Others are resisted because they are perceived as being designed to "soften up" the workers for impending technological or administrative changes.

2. The agents of the organization may accept the program but find themselves in a conflict situation if they attempt to participate honestly and freely. On the one hand, they may like to cooperate with and speak freely to the researcher. On the other hand, they may fear that detrimental information might reach the boss who happens to be very "cool" toward the program. A more frequent example of this phenomenon is the foreman who may find himself torn between management and employee groups and therefore may feel very insecure about taking part in research that may be viewed by the employees as management sponsored.

3. The workers and their immediate supervisors might accept the research program, but the upper management officials may define certain overall policies which prevent the employees from speaking freely. These policies will tend to crystalize resistance on the part of the workers and lower level supervisors.

4. Resistance to research may occur because the research involves two departments which are fighting for power within the organization. The research is delayed until the "power struggle" is finished.

5. There are two cases on record where the complete cooperation of management and the unions was gained, but the research was considerably delayed because the local Chamber of Commerce was not in favor of the research. In both cases, we might add, the organizations to be studied were in small towns where they provided a primary source of revenue for the town people.

6. A rather frequent reason for resistance to research is the fear on the part of the management of the organization (union, industrial, or otherwise), that the research may uncover material which might not be favorable to the organization. Closely allied with this reason is fear that some important secret technical information may be required.

7. One research group reports that their research is being continually blocked because the organization they are studying seems to gain prestige from the research group. The organization therefore wants to delay the researchers in their work to keep them at the plant.

8. The day-by-day experiences of subjects may be filled with crises. For example, production is going bad; bonus pay is down; a lay-off is rumored; one of the men is annoying the other; the foreman is hopping on the boys; it is a terribly hot day; the tools are bad, etc. If the respondent is thrust into an interview suddenly, one of these factors may be in his mind. If the interview "hits" the respondent at such a time, there may be a tendency to look upon the researcher as a "big nuisance."

9. On the other hand, in highly repetitive types of operations workers may develop a work routine which is identical day in and day out, year in and year out. The research interview may seriously interrupt this routine.

10. Management people may dislike to be interviewed because they dislike anything that takes them away from their job and leaves them "out of touch" with organizational matters, over which they are personally responsible.

11. Many organizations create an authoritarian climate in which the subject is dependent upon a leader who tends to require complete loyalty to the organization. Working under such conditions for many years may make the subjects cautious in answering questions that might "place the boss in an unfavorable light."

Perhaps these examples may suffice to suggest the variety of possible reasons for organizational resistance to research.

## **Examples of Defense Mechanisms Related to Organization**

*Creating Damaging Rumors.* Recently, a researcher initiated his investigation after top management had participated in establishing the study objectives and had accepted the overall program for research. The second day of interviewing started with a phone call from the vice-president. He requested the researcher to come to his office immediately.

Upon entering the office, the vice-president insisted the research be temporarily halted since the supervisors were "up-in-arms". They had heard a rumor that the researcher "is here to figure who is neurotic and who isn't, and to report to top management." The arrangements had proceeded so smoothly the first day that no resistance was expected. The researcher attempted to cover up his own astonishment with a statement that "Indeed, it would be difficult for the plant to permit research under these conditions and it would probably destroy much of the validity of the data."

The vice-president was ready to agree to an immediate postponement when the research worker pointed out that (a) top management, by postponing the research, would imply that the rumor might have validity, and (b) rumors in organizations, like fever in a human body, may be symptomatic of underlying problems and should not necessarily be "snuffed out." Rather, it would be vital that the rumor be understood clearly and its real purpose be uncovered.

Top management agreed and an investigation followed. During the investigation, the following significant facts were uncovered: The vice-president had personally telephoned all the middle management supervisors on the list that were to be interviewed. (This step was contrary to the plan originally defined whereby the personnel manager of the local plant was to make the contact). The vice-president began the telephone conversation with the usual remark, "How are things," and then informed the supervisors that a certain "Dr." was coming down to their department tomorrow to interview them. He informed the supervisors that the research worker would make no report to the vice-president, and encouraged them to speak freely. The supervisors, who were lead by a stern, rather autocratic, plant manager, thereupon became quite anxious for at least three reasons. In the first place, the vice-president had never called them personally before. Secondly, the company had recently hired a psychiatrist who had just completed some personal interviews with some of the supervisors reputed to have ulcers. The supervisors felt that some of the results were reported to top management. Thirdly, the plant manager was on vacation. The supervisors, being very loyal to their plant manager, did not want to participate until they knew how he felt about the entire project. Since they could not reach him, they began to perceive the researcher as a personal "hatchet man" of the division office sent down to "wield the axe" while the plant manager was on his vacation. Once these feelings were brought out into the open and responded to appropriately, the rumor died down.

Not all research workers would recommend that action be taken during a rumor. In another plant, the writer worked jointly with a psychiatrist. A similar rumor was circulated concerning the psychiatrist. The rumor began, it was thought, because the psychiatrist had been badly introduced by the management to the employees. The psychiatrist chose

to ignore the rumor. He simply continued his interviewing and answering questions concerning himself whenever requested. As far as the writer could ascertain, the psychiatrist maintained satisfactory relationships with the employees. The rumor faded away in about a week.

*Giving the Researcher the Run-Around.* There are numerous examples of research groups being delayed by being continually referred "to the appropriate authorities" for permission to release certain desired information.

One research group reported the following incident. They had received enthusiastic approval by the home office of a large corporation to study one of the smaller plants many miles away. Although the research group obtained blanket permission in writing, they found upon arrival at the local plant that they were being blocked at every turn. The local authorities insisted that they did not have authority to give out the information requested. When reminded of the blanket authority given by the home office, the local authorities replied that the authority granted was general rather than specific, and therefore, they were not certain that the specific information requested by the research group could be given to them. The research team soon found itself spending most of its time travelling to the home office acquiring specific permission for various data.

It was discovered, after a few months of patient investigation, that the plant personnel manager had made some private deals with the local union officials in order to keep the plant in operation. As it was, the union and the employees were being given services in excess of the home office policy. The personnel manager, fearing that this information would eventually get back to the home office, attempted to stop the research by placing obstacles in the path of the research workers.

*Overwhelming the Researcher with Irrelevant Information.* One research team reported that in the initial stages of their research they were guided through long tours of the many departments of a large manufacturing organization and were carefully limited to observing and asking questions related to the technical problems involved. The supervisors who acted as guides, curiously enough, refused to answer questions concerning other than technical problems. Some typical excuses were that they "didn't know much about the other problems," that "the departments have few if any human relations problems," and that "people are that way anyway, my real problems are helping to keep the production moving." After some months of research the supervisors admitted that they had deliberately refused to discuss the other subjects raised by the researchers. It seemed that they did not particularly trust top management or the research group who were observed to have periodic meetings with the top management. Much of the resistance began to break down after the research team began to become "part of the lay-out" (as one man said) and had noticed many human relations incidents that were apparently not reported to top management.

*Stereotyping the Research Worker: "Long Hair".* A top executive rationalized his resistance to the researcher by projecting upon him such dubious titles as "long hair," "a man up in the clouds," "an idealist," and "a philosopher spinning day dreams." The researcher could not institute any action research as long as he was perceived by the top executive in this light. Through this defense mechanism the top executive was able to ignore the changes that he was beginning to realize he should make in himself. "After all", he could say to himself, "why the devil should I listen to a long hair who is up in the clouds and does not realize my problems."

Another executive discussed the time factor associated with human relations changes as follows: "We just can't wait in business. We can't wait for years. It's today that is important. You can't think of tomorrow. It's today. Time is valuable in business. It costs money. What have you got that can change today? You know, that's the trouble with you fellows. You don't see the realistic practical side of life." Neither of the executives, be it noted, requested that the researcher leave the organization. In fact, both kept calling for meetings ostensibly to see how the research was coming along. Interestingly enough, the majority of the time was taken up discussing their problems in instituting some of the change.

*Stereotyping the Research Worker: Communist.* Stephen Richardson<sup>2</sup> reported an incident in which the subjects defended themselves from the research team and at the same time used it to further their own ends. A research was focused on two factions in a local union. The focus of the research became known in the local. The researcher had great difficulty in obtaining an interview with the chairman of the shop committee. However, he was able to interview a man, Mr. X, who had just been eased out of the shop committee and was very willing to talk about the factions. This man told the researcher that the chairman of the shop committee was spreading the rumor that the researcher was a communist and was discouraging the shop stewards from cooperating in the research. Mr. X also said that the chairman would shortly lose office (this happened as predicted) and advised the researcher to continue her work and make no comment.

Richardson diagnosed the rumor as follows. "The chairman of the shop was insecure and felt that with the present focus of the research a good deal of data damaging to himself would be obtained by the researcher. Therefore, he used the rumor as a way of attacking the researcher before she could attack him."

*Trying to Make the Researcher a Detective.* Top management executives have attempted to defend themselves from being examined by attempting to coerce the researcher into the role of a personal secret agent for top management. For example, a controller asked the researcher to "please pay special attention to Mr. Y when you interview him. You

<sup>2</sup>S. A. Richardson, "Progress Report on Field Research Training Program," Feb. 1952, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.



know, in my job I have a lot of headaches. I don't think these men are maturing properly for top level assignments. They don't seem to have the spark and the ability to be go-getters. I would be very much interested in hearing what you have to say about them." In another instance, a plant manager kept asking the research worker, "Tell me, what the hell have you fellows been learning around here? . . . I know, we've confidences to observe and I want them to be observed. I'm not trying to breach them. But, well, . . . for example, what's going on during the supervisory meetings . . . what do you think of my supervisors?"

In both cases, the executives attempted to use the researcher as a channel of communication. The formal channel, for some reason or other, was blocked for the type of information desired. If the researcher were to accept this role, he would not only be violating professional ethics but he would be preventing the executives from experiencing a need to examine why they were unable to obtain this information by themselves. Also, if the researcher were to provide the information, he would be likely to reinforce a probably mistaken self-perception on the part of the executives, namely that it was the others who were "immature and not developing adequately."

Still another example, with a different outcome: An engineer in a middle size plant approached the researcher and asked for a private interview. The interview was granted. During the discussion, the engineer unfolded a "hard luck story" concerning his relationship with his boss. After painting a dark picture of his future, the engineer pleaded with the researcher to "please tell me . . . just give me an idea of what the boss thinks of me." The researcher sympathized with the engineer and agreed that he was experiencing quite a lot of difficulty, but naturally, he refused to give the information. The engineer became quite upset over the "cold-bloodedness" of the researcher, became very aggressive, and left the room hurriedly. After some months, the researcher learned that the engineer had spoken to many of the supervisors in the plant. He described the research worker as a "selfish s.o.b., who wouldn't help a guy out when the going was rough." The interesting point was that according to the other supervisors the researcher's "stock" with them increased substantially. The supervisors commented that although they understood the engineer's problem, they were glad to hear that the confidence originally promised was maintained.

*Changing Human Relations Problems into Administrative Problems.* In the limited experience the writer has had in conducting research, he is increasingly being impressed by how many subjects hide their human relations problems from others and from themselves by consciously and unconsciously redefining them into technical problems. Once the switch is made, then it follows for the subject that the need for research into human relations problems is not important. The important problems become "to add a new machine," or "retrain the sales personnel," or "to

have more accurate cost accounting records," etc. In this connection perhaps, one of the most often heard rationalizations is something to the effect that "our business, unlike others, is very complicated. One of the most complicated in the entire industry. Why we have hundreds of small little parts that go to make up our product. One slight error on anybody's part throws everything off . . . etc." If the researcher accepts this as being the actual fact without further information, then the subjects are spared from having to discuss any personal problems that they might have with other members of the organization.

*Assigning the Researcher to Impotent Personnel.* Another defense mechanism not so frequently experienced is to assign the researcher to an employee whose status and rank is low enough to make him rather impotent and unimportant as far as the research is concerned. As long as the researcher is tied to this impotent person, he will not tend to be much of a threat to the organization.

We would like to emphasize that one has to differentiate status and official rank in this problem. Thus, it is possible that a personnel manager or an old time supervisor ready to retire, or an executive vice-president may be highly impotent and helpless as far as the conduct of the research work is concerned. On the other hand, a janitor, a drill press operator, or a plant guard may be highly important and influential persons. It seems therefore advisable, to keep in mind that impotence is not necessarily correlated with official rank.

*Keeping the Researcher "Tied up".* Finally, it is possible for an organization to defend itself by scheduling the researcher with many interviews with people who want to see him. If the researcher is to have all these interviews, he is not left much time to examine the problems he feels are more crucial. This defense mechanism does not in the writer's experience last long. First, the plant personnel probably do not have enough free time to continue such activity over a protracted period of time. Second, the primary purpose of this defense mechanism is usually to protect the subjects from the researcher until they understand him better and the purposes, goals, and methods of his research are clarified.

### **Concluding Statement**

In closing, it seems worthwhile to mention briefly the following points concerning defense mechanisms. First, we suggest that defense mechanisms be viewed as attempts by the subject to adapt to the researcher. Thus the researcher need not worry or become unduly alarmed if subjects are defensive. In fact, it may not be unfair to suggest that he should worry when the subjects are not defensive. The researcher's task, it seems to us, is to learn to understand the defenses in the same manner a clinician understands the feelings of his patient. Viewing defense mechanisms in this light helps the researcher learn to use them in a con-

structive manner. It seems to us that defense mechanisms are important indicators of the psychological world of the subject, the "social climate" of the organization, the quality and strength of the relationship between the researcher and the subject.

Finally, we suggest that the researcher should study the defense mechanisms and the conditions under which they occur in order that he may better understand himself, his role as a researcher, and the effects that these two mutually dependent factors have upon the subject and the organization.